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SUBJECT: KABILA MAKES THREE-DAY SURPRISE VISIT TO GOMA

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: President Joseph Kabila made a three-day unannounced visit to North Kivu province September 19-22 before beginning an extended trip to Belgium and the U.S. In his second trip to the province since his December 2006 inauguration, Kabila called once again for all military units to report for integration. During his stay Kabila met with provincial military and political authorities and toured the town of Sake, the site of recent fighting between the Congolese military and forces loyal to renegade General Laurent Nkunda. It is not believed Kabila met with any Nkunda representatives. End summary.

¶2. (U) President Kabila made a surprise visit to North Kivu September 19 before he was to begin an extended trip to Belgium and to the U.S. for the UN General Assembly. The visit was Kabila's second to the province since his December 2006 inauguration. The first visit, in December 2006, also followed fighting between pro-government Congolese military (FARDC) troops and forces loyal to Laurent Nkunda. Despite his unannounced arrival, Kabila reportedly received a warm welcome in the provincial capital of Goma, walking from the airport to the center city with large crowds lining the route. The president stayed in Goma until midday September 22 when he departed for his previously scheduled trip to Brussels. (Note: Kabila had earlier planned to leave for Brussels on September 20; no announcement of his delayed departure was made until he returned to Kinshasa on September ¶22. End note.).

¶3. (U) Speaking to the press shortly after his arrival, Kabila reiterated that all military forces that have not yet reported for integration ("brassage") must do so immediately. Stating his position was firm, Kabila promised that those who refuse such orders will be "corrected" by the government. He further rejected arguments -- such as Nkunda's -- that private militias were necessary to protect local communities. Kabila argued that such a position was invalid as there was only one national army, whose mission was to protect all its citizens. He further urged that all citizens and institutions, not just himself and the central government,

¶4. (U) Kabila also called on FDLR fighters to return to their homes in Rwanda. He said the militias can no longer remain on DRC soil and must turn over their weapons. Kabila added that if they do not do so willingly, the GDRC would disarm the FDLR by force.

¶5. (U) Kabila met with a variety of local actors during his stay, including provincial military and political officials on September 19. He later spoke with representatives from

the humanitarian community, thanking them for their hard work and reiterating his support for humanitarian operations in the province. Kabila traveled to the town of Sake, 20 miles west of Goma, on September 21 to review the area's security situation two weeks after fighting ceased between government and Nkunda forces. In Sake, he held a closed-door meeting with local residents. One participant told MONUC's Radio Okapi Kabila promised to bring peace back to the region and to punish those who collaborate with the insurgents.

¶6. (SBU) Kabila's visit has received mixed, albeit predictable, reviews in North Kivu. Former governor and current provincial parliament member Eugene Serufuli, who met with the president, told us Kabila was able to assure the population he had the situation well in hand and had a plan to eliminate the threat of negative forces. Didier Iwondo, the head of North Kivu's immigration authority, told us Kabila did not ask many questions during his meetings with provincial officials and did not appear particularly well-informed. Iwondo added, however, that he believed Kabila now has a better appreciation of the province's problems.

¶7. (SBU) Those close to Nkunda were more negative in their assessments. Prominent local Tutsi businessman Victor Ngezayo told us Kabila refused to meet with any representatives from Nkunda's political party, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), or with any groups opposed to him. Ngezayo said this showed Kabila has little interest in hearing from all the people of North Kivu, only those who agree with him. CNDP spokesmen argued Kabila's visit "changed nothing" and only served to increase tensions. They told us Kabila refused to negotiate a peace with Nkunda and threatened "war" against those even suspected of being associated with the renegade general.

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¶8. (SBU) Comment: Kabila's visit to North Kivu may have been unannounced but was certainly not uncalculated. The trip was clearly a maneuver to shore up his support in a region that voted overwhelmingly for him and in advance of a high-profile international tour. The president's popularity has been eroding since the government launched its ill-fated "mixage" plan, and it fell further -- particularly in the international community -- with his militaristic stance on Nkunda and the army's poor performance against him. It is unlikely, though, that Kabila's short stay -- with no change in policy or attitudes -- will soon end the deteriorating security conditions in the province. End comment.
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